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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 005748

LONDON FOR TUELLER; PARIS FOR ALLEGRONE

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [XF](#)
SUBJECT: HAFIZ AL-ASAD: LAST DEFENDER OF ARABS

11. CONFIDENTIAL - ENTIRE TEXT. CLASSIFIED BY:
CHRISTOPHER W.S. ROSS, AMBASSADOR. REASON: 1.5 (D) .

12. SUMMARY: THE IMAGE OF HAFIZ AL-ASAD AS THE LAST
LINE OF DEFENSE AGAINST ISRAELI ATTEMPTS TO
"OBLITERATE" THE ARAB IDENTITY IS AN INCREASINGLY
PREVALENT THEME PUT OUT BY THE SARG, AND WILL ONLY
INTENSIFY IN THE RUN-UP TO AND AFTERMATH OF THE
NOVEMBER 16 CELEBRATION OF 25 YEARS OF ASAD'S RULE.
ALTHOUGH UNREALISTIC RHETORIC IS PART OF THIS
IMAGE-BUILDING, ASAD'S "ARABISM" SHOULD NOT BE
DISMISSED AS MERELY A PLOY. GIVEN THE LACK OF
FORWARD MOVEMENT IN THE SYRIAN TRACK AND GREATER
SUSPICION OF ISRAELI MOTIVES, WE THINK ASAD WILL
INCREASINGLY VIEW ANY NEW PEACE PROCESS PROPOSALS
THROUGH THIS ARAB NATIONALISM OPTIC. ONE COMPONENT
OF THIS OPTIC IS THAT ISRAEL IS ULTIMATELY SEEKING
TO "CORNER" SYRIA, AS IT HAS MANY OTHER ARAB
PARTIES. END SUMMARY

13. ALTHOUGH THE SYRIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM HAS ALWAYS
SOUGHT TO CREATE FOR HAFIZ AL-ASAD A DOMESTIC AND
EXTERNAL IMAGE AS AN ARAB -- RATHER THAN STRICTLY A
SYRIAN -- LEADER, THE HYPING OF ASAD'S DEFENSE OF
ARAB RIGHTS HAS INTENSIFIED WITH THE LACK OF
PROGRESS ON THE SYRIAN TRACK AND ISRAEL'S GROWING
RELATIONS WITH OTHER PARTS OF THE ARAB WORLD. THE
THEME THAT ISRAEL IS SEEKING TO "OBLITERATE" THE
ARAB IDENTITY VIA WHAT ASAD CALLS "MIDDLE
EASTERNISM" IS AN INCREASINGLY COMMON FEATURE OF
SYRIAN RHETORIC.

14. BUT IT IS NOT JUST RHETORIC. WE BELIEVE IT
COLORS HOW ASAD PERCEIVES PROPOSALS MADE IN THE
SYRIAN TRACK, AND SYRIA'S STANCE TOWARD THE REST OF
THE PEACE PROCESS. WE ALSO BELIEVE THIS
SLEDGEHAMMER-LIKE PUBLIC RELATIONS TOOL WILL COME
DOWN EVEN HARDER AS SYRIA BEGINS TO CELEBRATE THE
SILVER ANNIVERSARY OF THE "CORRECTIONIST MOVEMENT,"
ASAD'S 25 YEARS IN POWER. THE SYRIAN BA'TH PARTY
IS INDEED ONLY A SHELL OF ITS FORMER SELF, BUT ONE
OF THE FEW FACETS THAT REMAIN IS ITS IDENTITY AS AN
ARAB -- NOT JUST SYRIAN -- MOVEMENT.

15. IN THE RUN-UP TO THE NOVEMBER 16 FETING OF THE
CORRECTIONIST MOVEMENT, ASAD IS BEING EXTOLLED AS
"THE FIRST ARAB STRUGGLER." HE IS BEING REFERRED
TO MORE AS AN ARAB LEADER THAN THE SYRIAN LEADER,
AND AS THE SUPREME DEFENDER OF ARAB RIGHTS. ASAD'S
ARAB IMAGE PERMEATES ALL EVENTS HERE -- POLITICAL
OR OTHERWISE. THE MINISTER OF CULTURE RECENTLY
OPENED AN INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL IN DAMASCUS
(WHERE AN AWARD-WINNING TUNISIAN FILM WAS EXCLUDED
BECAUSE ITS DIRECTOR HAD TRAVELLED TO ISRAEL) WITH
AN EXPRESSION OF APPRECIATION FOR PRESIDENT ASAD'S
CONCERN FOR THE ROLE OF CINEMA IN ENLIGHTENING THE
PEOPLE AND GIVING AN IDEA ABOUT THIS COUNTRY WHICH

IS FACING A FIERCE ENEMY WHO TRIES TO ANNEX MORE ARAB LANDS IN DEFIANCE OF UN RESOLUTIONS." WHETHER IT IS THE PREPARATORY MEETING FOR THE UPCOMING EU-MEDITERRANEAN CONFERENCE IN BARCELONA OR THE UN'S WOMEN'S CONFERENCE IN PEKING, SARG REPRESENTATIVES DO NOT MISS AN OPPORTUNITY TO SHOW THAT SYRIA IS CARRYING THE ARAB RIGHTS MANTLE, EVEN IF, IN THE SARG'S MIND, OTHER ARABS ARE NOT. AS THE NOVEMBER 1 OFFICIAL RADIO COMMENTARY SAID SUBTLY, "WHEN SYRIA PLAYS THE ARAB TUNE, THE ARAB MASSES REPEAT IT AFTER HER."

ASAD MISREADS THE ISRAELIS -- BUT DOES HE CARE?

¶6. IT IS OFTEN SAID THAT ASAD MISREADS THE ISRAELI POLITICAL EQUATION. SARG KNOWLEDGE OF ISRAELI DOMESTIC POLITICAL DYNAMICS IS INDEED INADEQUATE. BUT THAT IS NOT THE REAL POINT. EVEN IF THE SARG HAD PERFECT KNOWLEDGE OF THESE DYNAMICS, IT WOULD NOT ACT DIFFERENTLY, BECAUSE OF ITS OWN SELF-IMPOSED PSYCHOLOGICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL CONSTRAINTS. ASAD WILL DO A DEAL IF IT IS EVIDENTLY A GOOD DEAL FOR SYRIA, AND HE WILL NOT DO A DEAL IF IT IS NOT -- REGARDLESS OF WHETHER RABIN FALLS AND ASAD IS FORCED TO DEAL WITH A LESS FLEXIBLE LIKUD LEADERSHIP, OR IF THE PROCESS IS SENT INTO THE DEEP FREEZE WITH NO PROSPECT FOR THAWING. A RECENT INR ANALYSIS FOR THE SECRETARY ACCURATELY SUMMARIZED MANY OF ASAD'S PEACE PROCESS-RELATED VIEWS AS "UNRECONSTRUCTED." BUT THE MOST RELEVANT POINT IS THAT ASAD SEEMS PERFECTLY HAPPY -- AND INDEED PREFERS -- TO LIVE IN THAT UNRECONSTRUCTED WORLD. IT REQUIRES LESS CHANGE ON HIS PART.

¶7. ALTHOUGH SYRIANS WOULD ARGUE THAT IT IS "CONCERN" AND NOT "FEAR" WHICH DRIVES THEIR VIEWS OF ISRAELI MOVES, THE OBJECT OF SUCH FEELINGS IS THE SAME: THE BELIEF THAT, IN THE WORDS OF AN OCTOBER 31 OFFICIAL RADIO COMMENTARY, ISRAEL IS ATTEMPTING TO "CORNER" SYRIA AS IT HAS DONE ITS OTHER ARAB NEGOTIATING PARTNERS (EXCLUDING THE LEBANESE), AND EVEN SOME OTHER ARAB STATES WHICH HAVE COMPROMISED ON THE ARAB BOYCOTT AND OPENED NEW AVENUES FOR GOI POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONTACTS. (COMMENT: EVEN PARANOIDS HAVE ENEMIES.)

MORE FODDER FOR ASAD'S "SPINMEISTERS"

¶8. ASAD IMAGE BUILDERS HAVE NOT NEEDED THE UPCOMING CORRECTIONIST MOVEMENT ANNIVERSARY TO PROVIDE THE BACKGROUND FOR THEIR WORK. EVEN BEFORE THE CONGRESSIONAL VOTE ON MOVING OUR EMBASSY TO JERUSALEM, TWO REGIONAL EVENTS GAVE THEM AMPLE OCCASIONS: THE AMMAN ECONOMIC SUMMIT AND QADHAFI'S EXPULSION OF THE PALESTINIANS. THE FORMER PROVIDED THE PLATFORM FOR SYRIAN CRITICISM OF PREMATURE NORMALIZATION. EGYPTIAN FM 'AMR MUSA'S REPORTED CRITICISM OF SOME PARTIES' "RUSH" TO NORMALIZE HELPED ASAD MORE THAN IT DID MUBARAK BY ECHOING ASAD'S LINE IN A Milder FORM (NOTE: THE NOVEMBER 1 OFFICIAL RADIO COMMENTARY ALSO CRITICIZED THE "RUSH," USING THE SAME WORD MUSA DID -- "HARWALA").

¶9. IN AUTHORIZING THE ENTRY OF STRANDED PALESTINIANS EXPELLED BY QADHAFI, ASAD ACHIEVED THE GOALS QADHAFI TRIED TO ACHIEVE THROUGH HIS EXPULSION ORDER, WITHOUT ANY OF THE INTERNATIONAL AND ARAB CRITICISM THE LIBYAN LEADER SUFFERED. IN ONE FELL SWOOP, ASAD GOT TO DEMONSTRATE WHAT SYRIA CALLS A FUNDAMENTAL FLAW OF THE ISRAELI-PLO AGREEMENTS -- THE LACK OF THE RIGHT OF RETURN -- AND SIMULTANEOUSLY RECEIVED GLOWING PRAISE FROM THE STRANDED PALESTINIANS. (COMMENT: IF WE WERE CONSPIRACY THEORISTS LIKE THE SYRIANS, WE WOULD

ALMOST THINK ASAD PUT QADHAFI UP TO HIS EXPULSION ORDER.) AT THE RECENT NAM SUMMIT IN COLOMBIA, THE SARG EVEN TOOK IT UPON ITSELF TO BLOCK COSTA RICA'S MEMBERSHIP IN THE NAM BECAUSE THAT COUNTRY MAINTAINS AN EMBASSY IN JERUSALEM.

COMMENT

¶10. AS ASAD CONTINUES TO TRY TO BUILD HIS LEGACY AND HELP HIS SON AND OTHERS ASSUME COMMAND AFTER HE DIES, THE IMAGE OF ASAD'S LEADERSHIP OF "THE BEATING HEART OF ARABISM" CAN ONLY INTENSIFY. HE WILL VIEW ISSUES IN THE SYRIAN TRACK THROUGH THE OPTIC OF ARAB PUBLIC OPINION, EVEN IF IT IS ONLY THE IMAGE OF THAT OPINION HE HAS CREATED FOR HIMSELF. THIS PERSPECTIVE, WHILE USEFUL TO HIM IN THE CONTEXT OF HIS DEALINGS WITH THE ISRAELIS AND OTHER ARABS, IS ULTIMATELY AN IMPORTANT SOURCE OF INTERNAL LEGITIMACY FOR A MINORITY REGIME WHICH SEEKS TO PREEMPT POTENTIAL OPPOSITION AT HOME.

ROSS